

Into Yonderland: An Interview with Lee Simmonds

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Image Credit: Lee Simmonds

It's natural to feel a bittersweet nostalgia for all the things we perhaps took for granted before the pandemic. We've all felt the sensations of boredom and isolation that come from being, well, isolated. What might happen if we took our everyday existence, along with all its mundanity, and flipped it into absurdity? I recently had the privilege of talking (over Zoom) to Lee Simmonds, a young British contemporary fine artist who has

just wrapped up his first solo exhibition, *Into Yonderland*, at the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London. Simmonds masterfully utilises colour and aesthetics to imbue life into his figurative and contemporary artworks.

How was the experience of having your first solo exhibition?

It was very surreal. I remember I went into the space on the Tuesday before the Thursday that it opened and that was the first time I saw everything together. It was just like “Whoa, it’s actually here, in physical reality.” I made two paintings for the final show at university and I thought “It’d be interesting if I ever had the chance to have a whole room with just my work and see how that felt.” Never did it occur to me that that would actually happen.



****You described your exhibition as, " A sardonic rumination on the boredom that comes with suburbia and mundanity." Could you explain a bit more about what you meant by this? ****

I feel like the solo show was a kind of stepping-up and entering-into a more fleshed out alternate universe, where weird things happen. When I’m making a painting I want to riff off the drab, mundane aesthetic and satirize the sensations of chronic boredom that come from growing up in suburbia. I think there’s a vein of that through the work that I make. It was during university where I was often coming up with ideas and finding myself really interested in quite drab, middle-of-the-road aesthetics and objects. Because there’s something about suburbia; it’s quite literally in the middle.

Like treating suburbia as a liminal space, in a way?

Yeah! Liminal and non-miraculous, like “Oh it’s here but it’s nothing particular. It’s convenience.” At university I made weird videos and installations exploring those ideas and I always had a desire to turn them into paintings. I also remember really wanting to make paintings based on *The Sims*, with characters stuck inside a table or weird things like that.



****What is Yonderland to you, conceptually speaking? ****

For the show, it was a place of creative possibility. In the painting, *Into Yonderland*, there’s a window with ooze coming out of it. I wanted that to be the first painting you see as you enter the main space. The ooze is like the residual creativity from the show coming out into the “real world”, per se. I think *Into Yonderland* is a kind of *Alice in Wonderland* or *Coraline*, where you go through a tunnel and there’s this kind of, “Oh these are my parents but they’re not my parents because they’ve got buttons for eyes.”

In terms of your process, do you often start with an idea of a colour palette for a particular piece or does it develop spontaneously?

It's quite filled with chance and serendipity, where normally an idea will start with a particular object or with a particular action. Like the *Un chat dans la maison* piece which started with just this image of parting curtains and something coming through the curtains. That was the beginning of a new process where I established the content of what's in the piece before diving into that world and taking on a different viewpoint that's more three dimensional and dynamic. And I think there's a weird, loose sense of a colour palette in that initial viewing of the object that I then build things around.

Rothko said he relied on childlike instincts to create his art. Does this resonate with you? It seems like it does.

Yeah absolutely. And the really interesting thing about making the body of work for this show was that it was during lockdown and I was back in Bracknell, which is my hometown. I was going on walks and runs and seeing all these places that I hadn't seen in years that I used to go to as a child, and I remember feeling a real sense of reconnection with my childhood. And I don't know if it formed the paintings necessarily, but I think it's so connected to the kind of stuff that I make.



**How about your next project? **

The work that I've just made was interestingly named after a lyric in a song, and normally that happens when it feels less tailored. After *Yonderland*, which although I'm so glad that I've done, it all felt quite declamatory and it all felt a bit frantic. So now I'm really expanding and retracting.

Kind of like inhaling and then exhaling?

Yeah, absolutely. The art feels a bit more emotionally porous again. I think due to the time, scale and pressure of the solo show, making the paint quite thick and opaque quickly meant that things were more defined quicker. So I'm wanting to explore more layering and translucency with the paint, as well as more suggestion and liminality. And this one was really fun because it felt more like making an abstract painting. The majority of time was spent on just putting on paint in a way that wasn't really describing anything, but to bring it around into a more pulsing environment in which there are things going on, but they're melting into the painterly nature of it.

Lee's work will be on display as part of the 'IRL' group exhibition at Unit London from the 1st until 18th of December

*Image Credits: Balloons in Red and Pink, 2020. Into Yonderland, 2020. Un Chat Dans La Maison ,2020. *

